DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 461 CS 213 867

AUTHOR Graves, Roger
TITLE Virtual Realities for the 21st Century.
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Administration; Foreign Countries; Futures (of Society); *Higher Education; Intellectual Disciplines; Program Descriptions; *Retrenchment; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Canada; Educational Issues; University of Waterloo (Ontario); Writing Functions

ABSTRACT

In a time of continually shrinking budgets, first year composition programs in Canadian universities, particularly the University of Waterloo, Ontario, have proven to be vulnerable to budget cuts. In 1980, each teaching assistant had one class of about 22 students and there were over 20 tutors in the writing center. In 1992, each teaching assistant had two classes of 22 students, and there were only 9 tutors in the writing center. Of the mandated cuts in undergraduate enrollments through the Arts faculty, 54% of the decreases came from cutting composition enrollments. Composition is often not recognized as part of the English department but as a "service" course for other departments. Similar discussions of narrow definitions given to writing appear in writing across the curriculum literature. At the University of Waterloo, the establishment of a rhetoric and professional writing program occurred simultaneously with the emaciation of a large, traditional composition program. Large composition programs may well be rolled back to one course, and writing instruction particularly appropriate for the advanced literacies demanded by the information economy may fill the void. Twenty-first-century solutions to the problems include bringing together representatives of existing organizations to form a national group similar to the National Council of Teachers of English. Members of such a group could use electronic mail, journals, and newsletters to communicate; hold biennial meetings; and publish research. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Roger Graves

Virtual Realities for the 21st Century

ED358461

CS213867

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Roger Graves

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

Roger Graves

Virtual Realities for the 21st Century

"What we have here is an insurmountable opportunity"

-- Yogi Berra

The call for papers for the San Diego Conference on College Composition and Communication asked respondents to identify twentieth-century problems and twenty-first century solutions. The essay that follows addressed the conference theme by describing some of the realities some of us face in the late twentieth-century and by suggesting solutions or actions we can take to change these realities. I know that we all face our own sets of constraints. What I document below may be particular to my own situation, but I hope that *Inkshed* readers will contribute their own perspectives in an effort to think about what lies ahead and how we might prepare ourselves and our students for the twenty-first century. For me, though, reality begins when I stub my toe as I enter my lecture hall.

Reality Number One: My classroom seats 400 people.
CCCC guidelines suggest 20 students per room and 60 total per faculty member.

While it is true that my lecture hall holds 400, funding cuts for teaching assistants have curtailed enrollments to about 200 students. Nevertheless, I am required to lecture to a large mass of students at least once a week on how to write. I once tried to get them freewriting--really. It worked for a couple of weeks, but eventually the genre of the lecture reasserted itself and they simply refused to write. I felt like Peter Elbow in hell. It was awful. I did the only sane thing I could think of, under the circumstances, and limited the number of lectures and doubled the number of tutorial hours. In these tutorials, students met with teaching assistants to work through exercises, drafts, and peer reviews. They were encouraged to work collaboratively on assignments and provided with time to schedule meetings for group work in these tutorials. I regarded the tutorials as the valuable part of the course. In addition to

CS213867

lecturing and holding my own tutorial section as a demonstration section for the graduate teaching assistants, I was responsible for training, supervising, and evaluating them. This was one of my three courses for the term.

Reality Number Two: The first-year composition program has been systematically shrunk over the last 10 years. In 1980 each TA had one class of about 22 students; in 1992 each TA had **two** classes of about 22 students. In 1980 there were over 20 tutors in the writing centre; in 1992 there were 9 tutors in the writing centre.

I really don't know what to say about this except that the pattern is unmistakable. In a time of continually shrinking budgets, this program has proven to be vulnerable again and again and again to budget cuts.

Reality Number Three: Recent mandated cuts in undergraduate enrollments throughout the Arts faculty (and 10% of English department courses) resulted in disproportionate decreases to writing courses. Overall, 54% of the decreases came from cutting composition enrollments.

Part of the rationale for these cuts in composition courses came from the identification of them as "other," as the dark twin of literature. But funding is a more direct or immediate cause. The funding for composition courses consists mainly of money for teaching assistants, and that money has been cut drastically. The only alternative to cutting enrollments in composition would have been to devote more professors (as opposed to graduate teaching assistants) to teaching first-year students from other disciplines.

Virtual Reality: First-year composition is not a viable option at this time or at this place.

This conclusion is, of course, not one shared by the experience of others in Canada. The programs in composition at the University of Winnipeg come to mind immediately. Winnipeg's program follows the traditional first-year design of ensuring

that all students take some kind of writing course before they move on into their major areas of study. Winnipeg is remarkable because it follows up this instruction with a series of writing in the disciplines courses and with two writing centers staffed by faculty and peer tutors. Unfortunately, this program is an anomaly or exception to the rule. It deserves to be replicated at other Canadian institutions who share Winnipeg's non-traditional student body and mandate to provide access for non-traditional students. At Waterloo, however, composition (a term which has been constructed differently from rhetoric) is expendable.

Several factors--I hesitate to say causes--affect the status of composition in my department. First, many members of the department believe that writing does not belong in the department in any form. Composition is not recognized as part of the department self but is a "service" course for other departments. The department trades in it, but is not of it. Part of this self/other construction derives from the belief that writing is not an intellectual activity. Rather, it consists of grammar instruction and writing in the forms or modes of discourse. In the end, such a traditional (or current-traditional) definition of compositon contributes to a separation of composition from rhetoric and professional writing. The major program in rhetoric and professional writing avoids composition as a label because composition has "negative ethos."

Composition Evangelism

Such a situation is not unique, of course. In my own reading in composition (including articles by Michael Moore in early issues of *Inkshed*), I find similar discussions of narrow definitions given to writing, particularly within the area of writing across the curriculum. Many WAC directors spend much of their time selling their programs both within their own departments and in other departments across the university. In an effort to develop alternative forms of writing instruction, I developed

a proposal for Writing Across the Curriculum at the request of the department chair. This proposal was also encouraged by the dean and vice-provost of the university. In addition to meeting these administrators, I met with the university-wide undergraduate affairs group and talked about the proposal at department meetings. This kind of public discussion and advocacy--even if it doesn't result in immediate change--seems to me to be a necessary kind of social action within universities if we are to change the realities mentioned at the start of this talk. We have to change attitudes about what writing is, how it happens, and who is responsible for developing and nurturing student abilities as writers. I don't think this is a particularly stunning statement, but it does provide a necessary step to what I see as the next set of actions we need to consider to change our realities.

Another kind of social action demands our attention: external contributions to public policy debate. In Canada, the report of the Association of Universities and Colleges by Stuart Smith provides such an invitation to public policy debate because of its comments on writing, the link between communication skills and the information economy, and the attitude that writing instruction is an integral part of the "value-added" by universities to students. In the U.S., the debate over cultural literacy and increased accountability (read testing) by recent appointees to the Department of Education have also provided the opportunity for action.

In the upheaval caused by free-trade agreements between Canada and the US, among the countries of the European Commonwealth, and the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement, we have come to realize some of the changes resulting from the economic integration of North American, and indeed the world. We are entering the information economy, according to analysts such as Robert Reich (Harvard political economist, author of *The Work of Nations*, and advisor to President Clinton) and Nuala Beck (Canadian business consultant and author of *Shifting Gears:*

Thriving in the New Economy). This era will combine large-scale economic adjustments such as the 50,000 or so jobs Sears is cutting and the 25,000 jobs IBM has done away with. In the province of Ontario alone, over 300,000 private sector jobs have been lost in the past three years (Ontario had 4 million jobs at the start of the recession).[1] This reduction has taken place simultaneously with an increase in the use and value ascribed to information. Those who can create and manipulate information in a variety of media--not just print--will survive and even thrive in the face of economic upheaval. As teachers of composition, we will not be unaffected by these large-scale--tectonic?--shifts in the ground under our feet. In my own department I have seen--simultaneously--the emaciation of a large, traditional composition program juxtaposed with the establishment of a rhetoric and professional writing program. But these changes are not limited to my own institution either. I have also documented increased course offerings in writing and/or communication courses in various disciplines, particularly engineering, during these same difficult economic times.

In a recent survey of technical communication programs which I am involved in, respondents from many two- and four-year colleges and universities have identified many courses in technical communication. Because of incomplete results at this point I cannot speak with authority about what percentage of these schools have technical communication courses, but my impression from reading the results so far is that most have some form of this instruction. A survey I completed two years ago noted that most university-level engineering departments required their students to take some form of writing and communication course, and that more than half of these units offered their own course. Early returns from the current survey indicate that this trend continues.

---

[1] *Globe and Mail*, Wednesday, March 31, 1993, p. A 5.

Tea Leaves, Crystal Balls, and Composition Entrails

All of this leads me to wonder if we are seeing (overseeing?)--at least in Canada--the development of a two-tiered system. Help will remain scarce but available for the students at the very lowest levels of competency in our universities--in continuing education departments and second-language programs. Programs aimed at developing highly-skilled literacies--such as MA programs in technical communication, professional writing, and so on--will also continue to develop. Traditional composition programs--very expensive because of the volume of students who take these courses--will come under tremendous pressure as state and provincial budgets strain to find money in bad times. Nor will bad times and the budget crises that come with them go away with the current recession. Government borrowing for deficits in both the U.S. and Canada will ensure that pressure to downsize educational systems remains with us for the forseeable future.

What does it all mean? Large composition programs, particularly those with requirements for more than one semester of work (such as many in the U.S.), may well be rolled back to one course. Classes at Canadian universities will increase in size, and some courses may substitute computerized grammar and style programs for traditional classes. Many courses will simply be cancelled altogether.

What will fill the void? Writing Across the Curriculum programs, while not cheap and not a substitute *per se* for first-year composition courses, offer a kind of writing instruction particularly appropriate for the advanced literacies demanded by the information economy. These advanced literacies must be grounded in disciplinary knowledge and highly contextualized ways of communicating and knowing. They will be linked to subject or discipline specialties rather than required of all students, and advanced programs will have strictly limited enrollments. Courses will also be offered

not to the traditional undergraduate student body but to businesses who ask for and pay for continuing education.

Twenty-First-Century Answers

The larger picture--at least in Canada--suggests that the "plastic" art of composition (Susan Miller's phrase) will not be eradicated but will metamorphose. Just as it is squeezed out of one institutional location, composition transmogrifies itself into another shape and being and appears elsewhere in the academy. Composition or writing instruction will not disappear, but in Canada it will probably come under increasing pressure, at least as an offshoot of the English department. Instead, we can expect continued growth in writing courses tied to specific disciplines, specific contexts.

As writing teachers, this diaspora of sorts marks a change from established disciplinary identities in English departments to less well-established identities in various disciplines. In very real terms, it will become increasingly harder to form groups of colleagues interested in issues about writing. For example, one campus I visited had four separate areas teaching writing of one sort or another, but precious little communciation took place among these groups. On my own campus it has proven difficult to identify--let alone locate--all those who teach writing. One of our biggest challenges in Canada, then, will be to get organized on our own campuses.

We also need to get organized on a national level in Canada. Too many disparate and uncoordinated groups compete for the attention of instructors. Inkshed provides a meeting ground for a wide variety of perspectives, but it (at this point anyway) doesn't serve as a national body or developer of policy. The Canadian Council of Teachers of English (CCTE) focuses mainly on elementary and secondary school teachers. The Association of Community College and University Teachers of

English (ACCUTE) doesn't even have a category for composition or rhetoric as an area of interest. The Canadian Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) again serves a narrow--though valuable--function. But there is no coordinating body, no body to issue policy statements, and no political voice.

What can Canadian teachers of writing do about this? I think the first step would be to bring together representatives of these various organizations to form a national group much like the NCTE. Membership in one of the constituent groups would automatically provide membership in the national group. Even if these groups continue to meet separately, their voices must contribute to the national debate to effect change. Exactly how they could get together might involve any one of or some combination of the following methods:

- Electronic meetings, electronic mail, electronic journals and newsletters
- Biennial meetings, such as the National Writing Conferences held in Winnipeg
- Research publications such as *Textual Studies in Canada*
- Graduate education with a focus on rhetoric and composition

Some of these initiatives exist already in a loose network. My point is to affirm these as appropriate actions that would collectively make much more of an impact if they were coordinated and directed. To make a difference, we need to do the following:

- Get everybody together in one organization.
- Build a community/negotiate difference.
- Link political action (improved material conditions) to scholarly status.

These are the kind of actions I think will lead to twenty-first century solutions. We need to work at both the micro and macro, at both the local and national levels if

we are to improve both the quality of our own lives and the quality of the education we can provide for our students.

Roger Graves
Department of English
University of Waterloo

References

Beck, Nuala. *Shifting Gears: Thriving in the New Economy*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1992.

Graves, Roger. "Composition in Canadian Universities." *Written Communication* 10 (1993): 72-105.

Moore, Michael. "On Not Surveying Canadian Writing Programs." *Inkshed* 5 (1986): 3-5.

_____. "Upstairs Downstairs, Or Why `Writing' and `Program' are Four-Letter Words." *Inkshed* 2 (1983): 10-12.

Smith, Stuart L. *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Canadian University Education*. Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1991.

Reich, Robert B. *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st Century Capitalism*. New York: Knopf, 1991.